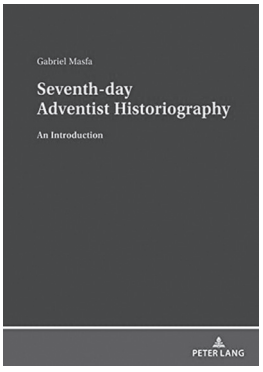
Portland, Maine, conference on Ellen G. White organized by Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, Julius Nam, and Ronald L. Numbers in 2009.

Wrestling With the Angel AT BULL RUN:

THE STORY OF ADVENTIST HISTORY

By Jonathan Butler

A review of Gabriel Masfa, *Seventh-day Adventist Historiography: An Introduction* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).



Prone to vanity, I started reading Gabriel Masfa's study of Seventh-day Adventist historiography near the end of the book. I wanted to know how he dealt with me. I eventually fell in line, however, taking the chapters in order. The first one focuses on classical historians such as Thucydides who are not my usual bedtime reading. But perhaps he should be.

Thucydides could teach us all something about Adventist historiography. As Masfa writes, Thucydides used "naturalistic explanation in order to reject supernatural claims by describing just historical facts." But Masfa could have brought the point home even more forcefully to Adventist historians. Thucydides was an Athenian general who battled Spartans in the Peloponnesian War, lost the war, and then wrote the history of it from a nonpartisan viewpoint. Unlike most Greeks at that time, he did not tell the story from the gods' perspective, nor with the bias of an Athenian who

believed the gods were on his side. Instead, he fathered "scientific history," based on naturalistic evidence-gathering and the strictest standards of impartiality.

If Thucydides could do that for the Greeks in the fifth century BC, could Adventist historians do it today writing Adventist history? And should they? Masfa introduces us to such issues and more in his book on Adventist historiography. In describing the work of historians both inside and outside of Adventism, Masfa will no doubt prompt readers with a number of important questions: Can Adventist historians write "scientific history"? Can they write with such detachment that we cannot tell whether they are Adventists or Mormons or Catholics? Are they able to tell the history of their religion as if God had no control of the "rise and progress" of the church? Can they write like the father of historical writing who left the gods out of the story and wrote with such clear-eyed objectivity that we could not tell whether he was an Athenian or a Spartan?

History and Metahistory

In the chapter on classical Greek historians, Masfa also discusses Christian historians. They were more likely read by 19th-century Adventists, including Ellen White. In 1858, following a spectacular vision in Lovett's Grove, Ohio, Ellen White wrote *The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels, and Satan and His Angels*. That would become her magnum opus and the prism through which Adventists saw their past and future. In reading their prophet's best-seller, Adventists got used to thinking of history as a cosmic battle between Christ and Satan, with both good and evil angels actively involved.

Conventional historians—including many Adventists—now write history closer to the way Thucydides did than Ellen White. Historians base their narratives on documents available to anyone with access to an archive. Ellen White said nothing about musty library books and boxes of primary sources as the basis for her history; she spoke of her longest visionary experience. Just three years after Lovett's Grove, during the Civil War, Ellen White saw in another vision what happened at the First Battle of Bull Run.

> The Southern men felt the battle, and in a little while would have been driven back still further. The Northern men were rushing on, although their destruction was very great. Just then an angel descended and waved his hand backward.*

Because of an angel, the North was defeated. As with Ellen White's sweeping history of Christianity, in her telling of the First Battle of Bull Run, the supernatural creates the story and its meaning. In her historical view—her vision—"God…sent an angel to interfere."

No *historical* evidence exists for angels as agents in the human story. Adventists can grapple with the same historical subject matter that Ellen White did, but they cannot document how the supernatural affected the flow of historical events. Ellen White went "behind the scenes" and told the story of Roman times or the Middle Ages, the Reformation or William Miller's era from God's point of view. But historians sit in the "cheap seats" and witness events, as humans see them, with the natural eye. From where they sit, even Adventist historians cannot see an angel at Bull Run. Historians can tell us a lot about the natural, cause-and-effect unfolding of events, but they have nothing to say, definitively, about the supernatural in history. Strictly speaking, that is not history, but a form of metahistory, where plot and moral meaning control the past. Contemporary *historians* can tell us, as historians, whether the people they study believed in the supernatural and how that belief affected their lives and times. But, as *historians*, they cannot share with us their own faith, or how they believe their God may have shaped human history.

This has not always been true of Adventist historians. For decades, they wrote providential history as if they could see—and *prove*—that God held the

events of the past in His hands. There was an angel at the Battle of Bull Run and that angel dictated the outcome of the battle.

After 1930, and especially after 1960, as more and more history teachers gained university education, they approached the past differently. With doctoral degrees in history, Adventist historians were still believers, but they now studied their subject systematically and rationally. In the transition from providential history to scholarly history, Adventist historians wrestled, for a time, with the whole idea of evidence for an angel at Bull Run. Students did not let them pass over Ellen White's Bull Run vision in silence. Historical professionals were asked, in effect, if "that PhD in history" meant they could no longer see the angel hovering over the battlefield.

Adventist historians now ply their trade in a far more mundane way than Ellen White did in writing *The Great Controversy* (1888, 1911), or than her handpicked historian of Adventist history, John Norton Loughborough, did in writing *The Rise and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (1892) or *The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress* (1905). Ellen White wrote of the past in a way that moved effortlessly between history and metahistory. Inspired by her example, Loughborough saw God's leading in Adventist history.

The difference between a Hebrew prophet and a historian is a lot like the contrast between a poet and a literary critic. While Ellen White sees the world as God sees it, from the extraordinary vantage point of a visionary, the historian's view is more ordinary. The historian explores *The Great Controversy* within its religious, cultural and social context, less as sacred scripture than as a literary genre. In what sense is it Whig history? How typical is her anti-Catholicism for her era? Is her book influenced by the poet John Milton, or an historian such as Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné or former Millerite H.L. Hastings who wrote *The Great Controversy between God and Man* in 1858? The historian may believe that Ellen White had visions. He may even have seen her in vision, like Loughborough did. But in writing about her, he always does so as a historian not as a believer.

Reading Masfa's review of 19th-century Christian approaches to history deepened my understanding of Ellen White's writings. Having been over this terrain pretty thoroughly in the past, I appreciated that Masfa had something to teach me. I did not imagine how captivated I would be by his review of Christian approaches to history among 19th-century historians who saw God's hand in historical events. According to him, in a way I had not thought about, historical giants such as Merle d'Aubigné and Philip Schaff had influenced the kind of providential history Ellen White wrote in *The Great Controversy* (more on that later).

In chapter two, on Adventism's theological approaches to history, Masfa closes in on my scholarly interests in his discussion of pioneer icons such as Joseph Bates, J.N. Andrews, Loughborough, as well as White herself. These historical figures are so familiar to me and, at the same time, far removed from what I now actually do as a historian. In contrast to an Andrews or Loughborough, I write history in a way that does not explain events by evoking the supernatural. Yet, ironically, I find it inspirational to write history in this way. What I needed to know from Masfa is how he views Loughborough's kind of history relative to my own.

Chapter three covers Adventist historians as apologists, such as the prolific, self-made, 20th-century historians Le Roy E. Froom and Francis D. Nichol. Over the years, both had lost a little of their luster for me, but I was interested in Masfa's view of them. Froom had famously written tome after tome about the history of millennialism to prove that Adventist belief in the Second Coming was not such a crank idea after all. Nichol had sought to rehabilitate the Millerites in the wake of a 1924 caricature of them by Clara Endicott Sears in *Days of Delusion*. He also defended Ellen White against D. M. Canright's assault on her in *Life of Mrs. E.G. White: Her Claims Refuted* (1919). It seemed to me that Masfa could have done more to expose the shortcomings of Froom and Nichol, who acted less as scholars than as defense attorneys.

When I immersed myself in chapter four, it read like a newspaper account of events I witnessed. I had been there. These historians are friends of mine. We had written "critical history" together: William Peterson on the French Revolution and Ellen White; Donald McAdams on John Huss and Ellen White; Ronald D. Graybill with a highly productive though complex relationship to the Ellen G. White Estate, which led to his two dissertations (one for Johns Hopkins University and the other for his employer); and Ronald Numbers' blockbuster of a book among Adventists, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (Harper & Row, 1976; University of Tennessee Press, 1992; W. B. Eerdmans, 2008). Masfa takes a more sympathetic view of Numbers than most Adventist historians did in the 1970s, especially in public. But in covering the historical

debate over *Prophetess of Health*, mostly in *Spectrum*, he is carefully descriptive without offering much in the way of fresh analysis.

I still regret that I did not do more to stick up for my friend Numbers in that difficult time. Though he expected churchmen and particularly the White Estate, to rain fire and brimstone on him, he had believed historians would support him and he was deeply wounded by their abandonment. I did write a review of his book in the American Society of Church History's journal *Church History*. C. Mervyn Maxwell, a church historian at the Seminary, was so upset by my favorable review of the book that he wrote the president of Loma Linda University and told him to terminate me. As time passed and the vitriol of the revisionist 1970s subsided, Adventist historians became more at ease with publicly expressing their support for Numbers. Masfa certainly illustrates this new attitude, though he is too young to have been there when Numbers was a lightning rod for criticism. As the University of Wisconsin professor entered the highest echelons of academic success, Adventist historians paid tribute to Numbers as the biblical Joseph's brothers did in Egypt.

Later we can make allowances for Adventist historians of the 1970s. Some had distanced themselves from Numbers for more than a matter of self-preservation as denominational employees. He had broken new ground as an historian and it would take a while to catch up. But a sea change regarding *Prophetess of Health* occurred in March of 1978 when Gary Land, whom Masfa admires, reviewed in *Spectrum* the White Estate's critique of the Numbers book. Masfa's failure to mention that review is a major oversight. With some trepidation, Land had faced off against the White Estate staff, despite its formidable clout at the highest levels of the church, and he changed many minds.

Land argued that the White Estate exaggerated its differences with Numbers. And where the divide was substantial, the White Estate had often been unpersuasive in its criticisms. Ultimately, it had been exposed for its confusion over the way historians work. It identified the critical question in this way: Ellen White's health teachings originated either from earthly sources or by way of divine inspiration. If Ellen White had drawn her health teachings from other health reformers, that undermined her inspiration and thus her authority. The White Estate insisted, in fact, that historians, from the outset, had to presuppose Ellen White's inspiration or they would reach faulty conclusions about her. In later conversations with Land, however, staffers backpedaled on whether historians had to assume the inspiration of a prophet—only the *possibility* of it. They would not suggest that historians should take for granted the inspiration of Ann Lee, or Joseph Smith, or Mary Baker Eddy. Only Ellen White.

> Adventist historians, like other academics and artists within the church, have been forced to stare up at the dark and ugly underside of the Adventist community, the church at its worst.

What Masfa Does

Masfa earned his doctorate at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in the Philippines, where he wrote the dissertation that became his book. Masfa is a church historian who teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at Babcock University, an Adventist institution with over 10,000 students in Nigeria. Though I have studied the history of Adventism in America for years, I am abysmally ignorant of Adventism beyond my country's borders, where almost all Adventists live and flourish. How did Masfa view the historians of Adventism, including my ilk?

When I started the book at the back—owing to my self-interest—I came across minor gaffes in the text. Looking for my name in the index, I appear, variously, as "J. Butler" and "M. Jonathan Butler" (who?). In the bibliography, I am identified as the author of Ronald D. Graybill's dissertation, "The Power of Prophecy" (which is now a book), though, fortunately, elsewhere in the bibliography, Graybill is also credited as the author. This put me on the alert for more spelling and grammatical issues than we would expect had the publisher, Peter Lang, used competent copyeditors as better-regarded publishers do. In the footnotes, one of White's

Testimonies is cited without indicating which of the nine volumes it is. I was also startled to read that Christ *did* come on October 22, 1844. As I read Masfa's text, I felt as if I were reading a rough draft. He could have benefited by more red ink from his dissertation advisers as well as his own editorial refinements.

But none of Masfa's errors should distract us from what is, in the main, a valuable and substantial book. Its limitations, which certainly can be attributed to Masfa, to no small degree also reflect the shortcomings of Adventist historiography itself. Adventist historians, with a few notable exceptions, publish through Adventist publishing houses and for an Adventist readership. Within these strictures, there has been a remarkable record of accomplishment, but only so much can be done.

Masfa's study of Adventist historiography is worth reading because it reveals both the promise and the failures of the field. Masfa focuses on three aspects of how Adventists write history: the first is the *historical methodology* and, in particular, how the faith of the historian relates to the writing of history; the second is the *mainstreaming* of historical subject matter—for him Adventist history—from the margins of public and scholarly attention to nearer the center; and third is what Masfa terms *mediating*, which is where historians find ways of explaining their controversial findings relative to the church and especially its churchmen. In all three cases, Ronald Numbers makes appearances, either evoking contention or admiration.

In the 1970s, the emotional debate over historical methodology among Adventist historians and their detractors might never have happened had Numbers written a different preface to the first edition of *Prophetess of Health*. It is tempting to imagine a counterfactual history of that period where he had not declared, in print, his attempt to write "as objective as possible" by refraining "from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation." Here Numbers had offered the briefest lesson in the historical method, but too many Adventists misunderstood. Before going any further, however, it is important to make the point that there is no such thing as "*the* historical method" as an all-encompassing category. There is no single "historical method." Historical methodology is too rich and variegated in its approaches to be defined in one way. But with Numbers in mind, among the many historical methods, there is none that uses the *supernatural* to account for historical cause and effect. Though Masfa is, on the one hand, drawn to the idea of faith as integral to historical methodology, which puts him at odds with Numbers, he is, on the other hand, dazzled by the importance of Numbers in placing Adventism on the historiographical map.

Historical Methodology

To understand *historical methodology*, Masfa reaches way back. Adventist general readers may skim over his studious survey of classical and secular historians. For Adventists, however, Masfa's description of the 19th century historians will become far more familiar and more relevant. Merle d'Aubigné was one of the most widely read historians of the century, especially his best-selling *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*. Ellen White read his books aloud to her family in the evenings, and she borrowed from them extensively in writing The Great Controversy. Merle d'Aubigné interwove traditional Christian doctrines and beliefs with the historical method as it was then coming into its own. In the same narrative, he wedded history based on evidence and metahistory inspired by belief.

This was exactly what Ellen White had done in her historical writing. Since the 1970s, Adventists generally concede that White was not entirely reliable as a historian, but her metahistory—of God's actions behind the scenes—is why they read her. She no longer settles historical questions but rather, at most, pulls back the curtain of history to reveal the metahistory behind it. But Masfa's discussion of Merle d'Aubigné and other providential historians dramatically changes that kind of thinking. He suggests that Ellen White relied on 19th- century historians not only for her history, *but for her metahistory as well*. We are left to conclude that visions were not essential to either. The history based on evidence and the metahistory based on faith drew on the historians at hand.

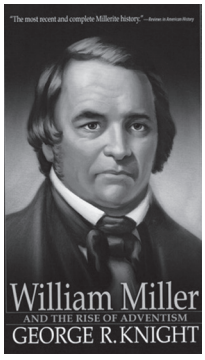
In 1974, I took my first job to teach and write history. I arrived at Union College from a PhD program at The University of Chicago, where I had studied millennialism. I was twenty-nine-years old. One reason I went to Union was because of Everett Dick, the great social historian of the American frontier. He had arrived there, in 1930, from a PhD program at University of Wisconsin, where he had studied the Millerites. Union College was not only his first teaching job but his only one; he remained there for his entire long and productive career. In our very first conversation, he told me a story with some acidity in his voice, despite recalling events of nearly a half century earlier.

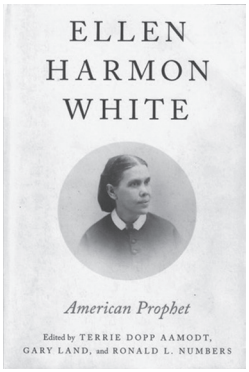
In what I took to be Dick's cautionary tale for me, he said that Froom and Nichol had quashed his effort to publish what would have been his first book. They viewed his pathbreaking social and religious history of the Millerites as too secular in its approach. They therefore imposed their considerable ecclesiastical will on the young faculty member, banning his book before it had been published. In what had to have been a moral low point for him, Nichol then disingenuously recycled Dick's dissertation for his own purposes in *The Midnight Cry*, published in 1944. But Dick did not allow this nasty turn of events to define him. He went on to pursue a distinguished career as a social historian and produce such notable works as *The Sod-House Frontier*, *1854-1890*; *Vanguards of the Frontier*; and *Life in the West Before the Sod House Frontier* among many other books. His academic life turned out fine despite the initial setback—perhaps *because* of it. Masfa includes the Everett Dick story in his narrative, though he could have named names with respect to Froom and Nichol. This is too important an incident to be understated. Dick was the harbinger for worse times for historians in the church before they became better.

ABOVE: Killington, Vermont conference that resulted in the publication of The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century *in 1987.*

The key to unlocking Masfa's understanding of how an historian's faith relates to the historical methodology may be found in his two appendices: Nicholas Miller's chart on Adventist historiography and Masfa's tweaking of that chart. Both charts, it seems to me, are rooted in a misreading of the preface to *Prophetess of Health*, where Numbers writes, "I have refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation." This single line provoked a huge ruckus in the church, and it is likely the reason so many opposed the book. But with this assertion, Numbers had not denied the existence of the supernatural; only that he would not use it to make his *historical* argument.

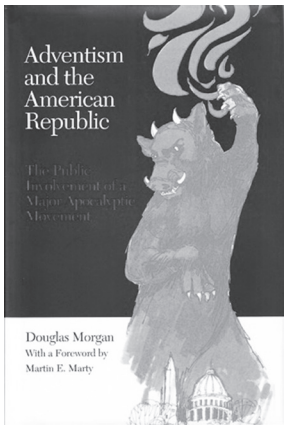
The preface tells us nothing about Numbers as a believer; it is simply an explanation of how history is written. One is a matter of faith; the other is a technical explanation. If we look to other disciplines, we can clarify the difference between faith and explanation. For example, a neurosurgeon may believe in God's power to heal and even pray before and after his work. That is an expression of faith. But on the day of my brain surgery, I want a highly skilled doctor at work, not a faith healer. A meteorologist may wholeheartedly sing in church the Isaac Watts lyric "And clouds arise and tempests blow by order from Thy throne." But she would not—of course—explain an impending storm except in naturalistic terms accessible to her unbelieving colleagues. Why should we have different expectations for historians?

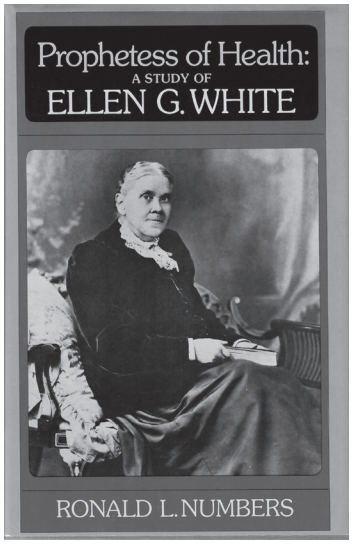


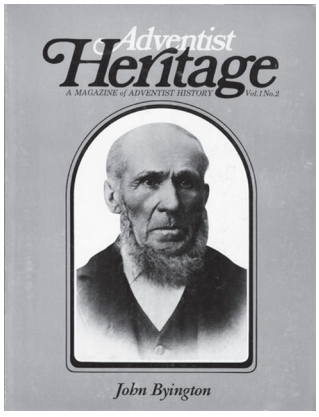


With his naturalistic point of view, Numbers does not belong to the "left" of other historians of Adventism, where we find him on church historian Nicholas P. Miller's historiographical chart. Nor should Numbers be all alone in his own forlorn category on Masfa's chart ("closed secular confessional history,"

Ronald L. Numbers







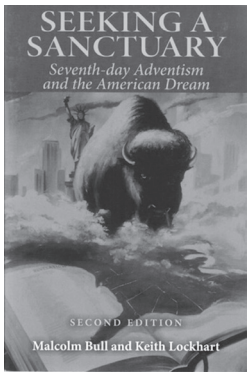
whatever that means). There he is placed at odds with his friends who occupy an altogether different category ("open critical history"), which includes McAdams, Peterson, Butler, Graybill, Land, and McArthur. There are no historians of Adventism these days—including George R. Knight, Nicholas P. Miller, and Gabriel Masfa—who would disagree with Numbers on historical writing as he describes it in his preface to *Prophetess of Health*. Numbers and Knight have both "refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation." With respect to Numbers, the fundamental mistake in both charts (Miller's and Masfa's) is the assumption that his lack of faith diminished the quality of his historical writing.

The charts do more to muddle the relationship between faith and history than to illuminate it. In the first place, Numbers is placed further to the chart's "left" for *Prophetess of Health*, though he wrote the book *as a believer*, if an increasingly disillusioned one. Secondly, he is credited with moving to more moderate contributions to Adventist history: such as *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (Oxford University Press, 2014) as well as *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, and an expanded edition, Harvard University Press, 2006), which in the latter case should appear on the charts but does not. When Numbers produced both these books, he admits, somewhat uncomfortably, when called upon to provide expert testimony at a Louisiana deposition, to being an "agnostic." His agnosticism should not be confused, of course, with nonbelief; it only means uncertainty. So, according to the charts—and this would seem to undermine the purpose of them—the less Numbers believes the *better* history he writes.

So, what is Masfa saying? Does he believe that "Christian historians" adhere to their own, distinctive historical methodology? Do they write history with a halo around it? Or is their history like everyone else's? Do they write history based on the same evidence with the same results? Masfa seems conflicted about this. He wants to have it both ways—a hybridized historical method which combines the naturalistic and the supernatural in the same historical work. He argues that George Marsden, Mark Noll, and Nathan O. Hatch, three lustrous names in the evangelical historiography of the late twentieth century, "initiated a new line of…historical methodology consistent with the canons of history and that of an honest dedication to the cause of Christ." They blended an historical method and their personal beliefs in a unique way or what Masfa terms a "nuanced historiography" (pp. 57-59).

They adhered to the best and most rigorous historical methodology just as any other historian would do. But when they came upon those "events" which were "a matter of faith" they were less *historians* than *believers*. They interpreted those events through the eyes of faith not the hard, cold eye of the historian. Masfa applauds these evangelical historians and he traces their influence to the most prolific and widely read of Adventist historians—George R. Knight—and several of his proteges: Gilbert Valentine, Alberto R. Timm, Merlin D. Burt, Michael W. Campbell, and Theodore N. Levterov.

For all the sophistication and deep reading that Masfa has done in this study, I think, at the heart of it, he obfuscates the nature of historical writing. He suggests that, regarding evangelical historians, being a believer creates an advantage in writing history, especially religious history. He finds the same to be true of Adventist historians in their debt. In Masfa's view, they add a special sauce to the historical method. But this is not true. The evangelical historians added nothing new to their historical method. They simply studied the heretofore neglected and marginalized field of evangelicalism with the same historical methodology employed by other historians regardless of belief or disbelief. Adventist historians likewise have dredged up new documents and studied them with fresh eyes but without drawing upon spiritual perspectives inaccessible to the nonbeliever. At critical moments in his study, Masfa seems to know this, but he should have been clearer and less equivocal in stating it throughout the book. From my reading of him, I am quite sure he is not looking to prove historically that angels had anything to do with the First Battle of Bull Run. As for Knight and his students from Andrews University, I am certain that Knight as a *believer* is closer to Burt, Campbell, and Levterov than he is to Numbers, but as a *historian* there is not a whit of difference between Knight and Numbers.



Mainstreaming

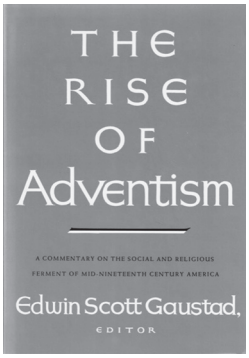
Masfa moves from the *historical method* to another major motif in the book: the *mainstreaming* of Adventist history. Here he finds that Marsden, Noll, and Hatch stand tall, once again, as role models for Adventist historians. Masfa celebrates the skill and artfulness by which these big-three brought American evangelicalism from the fringes of American religion as a discipline to its mainstream. This shift occurred after I entered graduate school and it changed the face of religious scholarship. Masfa clearly covets this *mainstreaming* of evangelical historiography, hoping Adventists can achieve something analogous to it. This calls for a heavy lift on the part of Adventist historians who tend to seclude themselves in a cultural and religious backwater far removed from the mainstream.

Masfa recognizes that Ronald Numbers is the remarkable exception to this insularity among historians of Adventism. He should pay more attention to Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, whose classic study of the denomination in *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (Harper & Row, 1989; revised and expanded edition, Indiana University Press, 2007) will outlive us all. The fact that their book fuses sociology with history may explain his neglect of it. In his study, Masfa also should have included Walter Rea, The White Lie (Turlock, CA: M & R Publications, 1982), though it is an odd mix to place Rea in the same paragraph as Numbers, Bull, and Lockhart. Masfa might have ignored Rea's book because it was such an undisciplined rant rather than a history or literary study. But the importance of Ellen White's literary borrowing for Adventist historiography makes Rea unavoidable. Fred Veltman's massive examination of White's literary practice in *The Desire of Ages* (1898) also deserves Masfa's attention. All that said, however, Numbers is in a league of his own for not only the most impactful book by an historian of Adventism but for his body of work on Adventist history throughout a celebrated career. And Adventist history has been integral to his success story, resulting in several of his more noteworthy scholarly trophies.

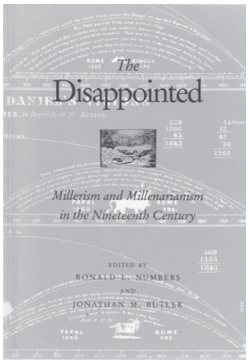
Numbers lived out the blueprint of how Adventist historians can mainstream the study of Adventism. Like the evangelicals Masfa admires, he attained employment in a non-parochial institution. He taught the bulk of his career in a penthouse of academia, allowing him to focus on research and writing unencumbered by the sectarian concerns of the Adventist church. Most of his extraordinary body of work had nothing to do with Adventism and earned him a named chair as a Hilldale Professor of the History of Science and Medicine at Wisconsin, with a joint appointment in Religious Studies. His extraordinary academic achievements over a lifetime also garnered him the Sarton Medal, the highest distinction in his discipline. All along he continued to

make increasingly significant contributions to the history of religion: not only *Prophetess of Health* but, in the long run, and perhaps more memorably, *The Creationists*, as well as such works as *Science and Christianity in Pulpit and Pew* (Oxford University Press, 2007), and his current project for Harvard University Press, a biography of John Harvey Kellogg. For just his publications in American religion —his career within a career—he was named president of the American Society of Church History.

The Adventists know Numbers for *Prophetess of Health*; the scholarly community and the evangelical world know him for *The Creationists*. Just after Numbers had first published *The Creationists*, Mark Noll came out with *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* in which he lauded Numbers for the book which placed the historian of science among "first-rate scholars" who write "with sympathy" for their subjects. Though Numbers was anything but "an antireligious zealot," he told a "disquieting" and "sad tale" about one of "the weaknesses of evangelical intellectual life." A distinctive form of creationism had become a matter of evangelical orthodoxy. Two aspects of Numbers' game-changing scholarship stood out: first, the creationist theory of a young earth had not been embraced by Christians or scientists until the 19th century; and second, that this novel theory can be traced to none other than Ellen White whose creationist views were then marketed by George McCready Price. This was a case when Ellen White can be credited with being an original who was truly "ahead of her time."



Though Numbers has reached the pinnacle of his profession with the publication of over twenty books on all areas of the history of medicine and science, he has never lost sight of Adventism. His several edited books on Adventist history—and the conferences he helped organize from which these books emerged—further refine the blueprint for mainstreaming Adventism. While still a professor at Loma Linda in the early 1970s, Numbers and his friend Vern Carner created a lecture series through the Loma Linda University Church which featured several of the more prominent scholars of American religion at that time. These academics each wrote essays on the cultural context for the origins of Adventism. As a neophyte scholar and the only Adventist among them, I wrote the essay on Adventism itself. The book that resulted was *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, edited by Edwin Scott Gaustad (Harper & Row, 1974).



In the mid-1980s, Numbers and I coedited *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in Nineteenth Century* (Indiana University Press, 1987; University of Tennessee Press, 1993). This book resulted from a conference in Killington, Vermont, which drew together major players within the field of American religion who wrote chapters for *The Disappointed* on the social, cultural, and intellectual world which had produced William Miller. Established scholars and fledglings in the field, non-Adventists and Adventists sat across from each other and hashed out their studies on Millerism.

Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet, co-edited by Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers (Oxford University Press, 2014) had been developed through a 2009 working conference in White's hometown of Portland, Maine. Numbers proved at first reluctant to participate, but the organizers realized, pragmatically, that they needed him as a magnet for drawing established non-Adventist scholars to Portland, and they knew, too, that he would be invaluable in securing a prestigious press for publishing the book. He ultimately agreed to coedit the book and write for it under one condition: that it be an even-handed historical work, neither parochial nor polemical. Each chapter draft was reviewed two scholars, one familiar with Adventist studies and the other a specialist in the historical context. When we gathered for dinner one evening in Portland at an elegant restaurant that had been, before its remodeling, the home of Ellen Harmon's childhood congregation—the Chestnut Street Methodist Church—there was nothing parochial or polemical about that incandescent occasion.

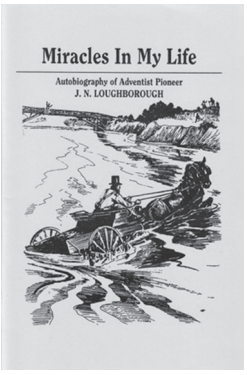
To celebrate what Numbers has done for Adventist history is not to suggest that Adventist historians should—if in fact they could—pattern themselves after him in every way. As for the "could" part: with respect to his academic achievements, Numbers borders on a *sui generis* figure. As for the "should" part: no one is urging Adventist historians to abandon, *en masse*, their teaching positions at denominational schools for state universities. Nor should they leave Adventism for agnosticism. But, as we have seen, Numbers can

be a role model in other ways. He can inspire them professionally to reach beyond the sectarian boundaries of Adventism, so they can see their subject matter from the outside and not just from within. He can encourage them to collaborate with non-Adventist historians and to raise new questions of Adventism within new intellectual and cultural contexts. Throughout his career, Numbers has acted as mentor and sponsor—often as the silent partner—for many historians of Adventism. In helping to mainstream Adventist historiography, he has been what Benjamin McArthur called "the rainmaker." He was certainly that for me. From the outset of my career, I determined to write about Adventist history for the non-Adventist world. In almost every project I took on—in some crucial way—Numbers had a hand in it. He linked me to the scholars with whom I worked and the presses through which I published. As with other historians of Adventism, I owe him.

Mediating

We should not be too surprised that Adventism has produced an historiography fraught with particular challenges, which surface in Masfa's study. As believers, Adventist historians struggle with removing the "God particle," as it were, from their historical arguments, especially when it comes to Ellen White's life and ministry. And in their relatively isolated enclave, they find it demanding to reach a mainstream audience. But nothing reflects the idiosyncrasy of Adventism more than what Masfa terms "*mediating*." This has to do with the "style or tone" adopted by Adventist historians rather than their academic prowess. It involves threading the needle between hagiography and more realistic history. The best at mediating, in Masfa's view, has been George Knight, but he cites other favorites, such as Richard W. Schwarz, Floyd Greenleaf and Gary Land. These scholars assume a "critical approach" to writing history but also a "more balanced" one that avoids "conflicts with church administrators." Despite his "provocative" style, Knight is especially adept at finding a middle ground between the "right and left wings of the Adventist world" (pp. 165, 171). Masfa's description of mediating has less to do with historical rigor, or imagination, or integrity than it does a dialect of diplomacy, etiquette, or civility. To survive among Adventists, historians must learn this second language.

Adventism is, after all, a culture with its own vocabulary and Adventist historians, occupying that space, have been writing for one another in ways that limit their contribution to the wider historical community beyond Adventism. Adventist historians do not look in on Adventism from the outside; they are insiders with a personal stake in how *their* story is written. They share in the same heritage as the subjects of their study. Too often, in other words, Adventist historians are as much *Adventists* as they are *historians*, which reduces their value to the church as well as to the scholarly community as a whole.



Masfa is right about the importance, for Adventist historians, of a language of diplomacy. What he neglects to mention, however, is that language involves two-way communication. It is not just the historians who are called upon to accommodate to the church but the church that must take care of its historians. Mediating would be unnecessary if there were not two sides. Everett Dick's troubling interaction with churchmen has been, unfortunately, repeated time and again. Adventist historians, like other academics and artists within the church, have been forced to stare up at the dark and ugly underside of the Adventist community—the church at its worst. If the historians need to do their part in finessing those findings that endanger traditional beliefs, the church at large needs to do

its part in opening up to fresh understandings of those beliefs. Over the years, the church has racked up quite a body count among its historians. Parenthetically, I should interject here, however self-serving on my part, that Masfa does not accurately depict the departures of Numbers, Butler, or Graybill from their denominational employment as historians. Though their cases varied widely, none of them was, speaking precisely, "terminated."

Masfa does not appreciate how much heavy lifting was required of historians in the 1970s with respect to "mediating," while the church leadership, seemingly, did not want to lift a finger. The Numbers case alone could supply enough illustrations of this to outweigh the Harmon "big Bible." But we can concentrate on examples that, to some degree, involve "mediating" from both sides. During the writing of *Prophetess of Health*, Numbers, on a post-doctoral fellowship at Johns Hopkins University, and Graybill, a doctoral student there, roomed together for a year, one night a week, in Baltimore. Also working for the nearby White Estate, Graybill generously alerted Numbers to important and, at times, problematic documents that could help with his research. In one instance, Graybill let Numbers know that Arthur White, who was secretary (director) of the board of trustees of the White Estate, had just uncovered evidence that Ellen White had taken her sons to a phrenologist to get their heads "assessed." Numbers was eager to see the source for himself. Graybill cautioned him to wait a few days so Arthur White would not suspect who had been the mole. When Numbers got around to asking White about the phrenology episode, he looked Numbers straight in the eye and denied there was any such thing. Graybill had done his part as a mediator, fostering a better understanding of Ellen White. Numbers had been diplomatic about timing his query to protect Graybill, an invaluable resource for historians and the church. But Arthur White had miserably failed as a mediator.

When the Numbers manuscript was in its late stages, the White Estate, as a mediating gesture, proposed a meeting between Numbers, Schwarz, and Graybill. The three of them together would comb through the manuscript, line by line, with an understanding: if Graybill and Schwarz agreed that a line should be altered, Numbers would do it. If Graybill and Schwarz, however, disagreed with each other, one of them taking Numbers' side, he would leave the line as he had written it. For all who had wanted the "summit"—including the White Estate staff—this was full-blown mediating. As a result—and this needs underscoring—*every line* of *Prophetess of Health* was approved of by either Schwarz or Graybill. But in the aftermath of that collaboration, things unraveled a bit. After the book appeared, Schwarz wrote a harsh review of it. But it turned out he had reviewed the earlier draft before substantial changes and softening of the manuscript. Schwarz apologized to Numbers for his gaffe. For Graybill's part, he toured the country for the White Estate, taking issue with Numbers for the book to which he had, in so many ways, contributed and finally given his approval. Graybill later apologized and Numbers accepted his apology.

The most astonishing instance of mediating came, in the same era, from another historian doing Ellen White studies: Donald McAdams. Oddly, Masfa failed to mention this. McAdams was in his early 30s at Andrews University, a new member of the History and Political Science Department that included Schwarz, Land, and, for one year, Numbers. He was also a close friend of William Peterson, across the hall in the English Department. As a historian of 18th-century Britain, McAdams became interested in Ellen White's use of historians in *The Great Controversy*, much as Peterson had been as a scholar of the Victorian era. McAdams painstakingly analyzed Ellen White's writing on Huss alongside the historical source she leaned upon most heavily for the Huss and Jerome chapter, James A. Wylie. During McAdams' work at the White Estate, Graybill fortuitously discovered Ellen White's original, handwritten draft of the chapter. In 1977, McAdams submitted a 234-page manuscript to the White Estate entitled, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians." With reference to the traditional understanding of Ellen White as an inspired writer, these findings were revolutionary. McAdams had carefully scrutinized the prophet's writing habits on Huss and his parallel columns placed her narrative alongside Wylie's. This made clear that her writing on Huss had not been based on visions but on her cribbing from Wylie. It also proved how obvious historical inaccuracies in Wylie made their way into *The Great Controversy*.

McAdams knew this was a bombshell. But he could not have been more accommodating to the White Estate or General Conference officials. Unfortunately, neither he nor the church seemed well served by it. McAdams had grown up in Takoma Park where his father had been Secretary of the General Conference Publishing Department and a member of the White Estate. Arthur White and his children were family friends. McAdams did not want to make trouble, but he did want to make a

difference. He asked the White Estate staff to study his manuscript and come to their own conclusions about it. Where it was appropriate to make changes, he would be happy to make them. He had already toned down an earlier version of the paper (1974) before offering the 1977 paper to the White Estate. He asked for a careful, detailed response to it from staffers. If they accepted his argument, it should lead to changes in how they described Ellen White publicly as an inspired writer.

All seemed to go well initially. The White Estate was persuaded by the McAdams study. Then Gerhard Hasel, a professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology at the seminary, entered the discussion. He attempted to refute McAdams on key points and, though his answers to the historian were largely untenable, the staffers cooled in their support of McAdams. No critique of McAdams ever resulted. No changes in White Estate pronouncements followed. McAdams even faced flak for his research. Robert H. Pierson, then General Conference president, unsuccessfully tried to block McAdams' appointment as college president of Southwestern. In good faith, McAdams had done his best to be a mediator, aiming for mutuality, but those with administrative power did not reciprocate.

In Masfa's study, we learn of the unique and daunting challenges for Adventist historians relative to methodology, mainstreaming, and mediating. With its strengths and weaknesses, Masfa's introduction to Adventist historiography tells a story well worth reading. Is it time for Adventist historiography to move in a new direction? Is it time for historians of Adventism to become a less exclusive club? Yes, of course! The time has come to invite in historians from a range of disciplines and a variety of faiths—even the faithless who become interested—to take on the task of doing Adventist history.

That brings to mind Joan D. Hedrick, director of Women's Studies and Professor of History at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is the author of *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1994) which won the Pulitzer Prize in Biography. In 2009 Hedrick delivered a keynote address at that working *Ellen Harmon White* book conference in Portland, Maine, which ran from Oct. 22-25. She gave insightful and inspiring remarks on the art of writing biography and then stayed for the remainder of the meetings. She found herself enthralled with Ellen White. She went home and dug into researching her life. She read the *Testimonies*. She then went to the White Estate in Silver Spring, MD, to explore the idea of writing a biography. But Hedrick became discouraged when told her access to the primary documents would be restricted and so she decided against doing the project. More recently, David F. Holland, Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School, has enjoyed a better reception from the White Estate and the church. Holland is due to publish a comparative biography of Ellen White and Mary Baker Eddy. Holland is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and he is used to non-Mormons contributing a rich literature to Mormon historiography. It is time for this to happen in Adventism as well. Change is coming: Don McAdams' book on Ellen White, John Huss, and James A. Wylie is being released by Oak and Acorn Publishing.

Adventist historians, of course, will continue to write, and for this we should be grateful. In the newest generation of these historians, much good work is being done. That's because the believers among them—including Masfa—have stopped claiming that they know, from their study of evidence, where angels have interfered in the human story. Adventist historians no longer wrestle with the angel at Bull Run. That fight is over.

Endnote

*Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 267.

JONATHAN BUTLER, PhD, studied American church history at the University of Chicago and has produced a number of historical studies on Ellen White and Seventh-day Adventists. He contributed two chapters, entitled "Portrait" and "Second Coming," to *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, edited by Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers.